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TAGS: PGOV NS DESI BOUTERSE

SUBJECT: FORMER MILITARY STRONGMAN DESI BOUTERSE'S PARTY
NDP VOTES TO DISSOLVE SURINAME'S LARGEST OPPOSITION BLOC DUE TO
INFIGHTING OVER BOUTERSE'S QUEST FOR THE PRESIDENCY

REFS: (A) 03 PARAMARIBO 413, (B) 03 PARAMARIBO 77

Sensitive but unclassified - please handle accordingly.

SUMMARY

11. (U) Suriname's National Democratic Party (NDP), led by former military strongman Desi Bouterse, voted to dissolve the Millennium Combination, the country's largest opposition coalition, on July 12. The move came after NDP's two coalition partners, Democratic Alternative (DA) and KTPI, publicly disparaged NDP's nomination of Bouterse for the presidency in the upcoming May 2005 elections. (See Ref. A.) The move leaves NDP in control of seven out of the National Assembly's 51 seats, KTPI two, and Democratic Alternative one, and will have little practical effect in the National Assembly. End Summary.

NDP VOTES TO DISSOLVE THE MILLENNIUM COMBINATION

12. (U) According to newspaper reports, Suriname's National Democratic Party (NDP), the party of former military strongman Desi Bouterse, voted on July 12 to dissolve the Millennium Combination (MC), the country's largest opposition group, ahead of the May 2005 elections. Party representatives in the National Assembly and members of the NDP's steering group accepted the recommendation of local representatives from various districts made in an extraordinary meeting July 9. This decision leaves NDP in control of seven of the National Assembly's 51 seats and former coalition partners Democratic Alternative (DA) and KTPI in control of one and two seats, respectively.

13. (U) The move came after leaders of DA and KTPI publicly voiced opposition to NDP's nomination of Bouterse for the Presidency. (See Ref. A.) In the June 30 edition of local daily Dagblad Suriname, DA's chair Djagendre Ramkhelawan declared that the NDP did not consult with DA and KTPI about Bouterse's presidential candidacy. He expressed surprise that NDP would support Bouterse as he had received an 11-year prison sentence from a Dutch court in 2000 for trafficking 474 kilos of cocaine and had an outstanding Interpol arrest warrant. Ramkelawan also cited Bouterse's involvement in the December 1982 murders of 15 prominent community leaders, the subject of an ongoing investigation. (See Ref. B.) If Bouterse were elected president, the international community would isolate Suriname, he said. KTPI chair, Willy Soemita echoed his concerns in a July 5 Radio ABC talk show.

REACTIONS

14. (U) When asked for his reaction, Bouterse said he regretted NDP's decision but placed blame for the breakup of the coalition on Ramkhelawan and Soemita. He reminded the public that the men are seasoned politicians who knew in advance that their actions would result in an appropriate response by the NDP. Bouterse noted that the NDP would be speaking later with three unnamed political parties to explore possible alliances. NDP Secretary Ramon Abrahams took a more diplomatic tact with his declaration that Bouterse's nomination was not a "take it or leave it" for the other parties in the MC while emphasizing NDP's intent to pursue Bouterse's nomination.

15. (U) Abrahams cited results of a June poll conducted by the respected Institute for Development Oriented Studies (IDOS) as proof that there is growing support for the NDP. 18% of 350 respondents in Paramaribo said they would vote for NDP, making it the largest party in Paramaribo. Abrahams claimed that the IDOS figures indicated that supporters of DNP 2000 led by former President Jules Wijdenbosch, a former Bouterse ally, are returning home to

the NDP. In a similar vein, he dismissed as insignificant, the Kankantrie movement led by NDP dissidents who are calling on Bouterse to renounce his presidential bid.

16. (U) Another senior NDP representative, Henk Kotzebue, tempered NDP's bravado regarding the elections. He confided to the Embassy that within the NDP talks are being held with Bouterse urging him to give way to NDP National Assembly Fraction leader Jenny Geerlings-Simons. Kozebue said that,

by persuading Bouterse to abandon his quest for the presidency, the party hopes to attract a large bloc of uncommitted voters. (Note: The latest IDOS poll indicated that 35.1% of respondents in Paramaribo were uncommitted. End Note.)

17. (U) To date, neither Willy Soemita of KTPi or Djagendre Ramkhelawan could be reached for comment. According to the July 12 edition of local daily De Ware Tijd, it is believed that these two political parties are in discussions with Wijdenbosch's DNP 2000 and the new coalition A1.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) NDP's decision to dissolve the Millennium Combination ten months ahead of the May 2005 elections shows the degree to which Bouterse and his supporters are willing to go to secure the presidency for Bouterse. Despite his baggage (the December 1982 murders and the 11-year jail sentence in absentia), the charismatic Bouterse remains popular nationwide. Bouterse failed in his attempt to control the Presidency through former President Jules Wijdenbosch in the 1996-2000 NDP government. Tensions arose between the two men, which resulted in Wijdenbosch finally bolting from the NDP in 2000 to form his own party, DNP 2000. For this reason, Bouterse is not willing to make the same mistake again. Some NDP insiders have told the Embassy that Bouterse is intent on getting a second chance at ruling the country since Bouterse, they claimed, had unwittingly allowed his first attempt at governing during the 1980-1987 military regime to be hijacked by unruly elements. There is, however, nothing in Bouterse's record since 1987 to suggest that he has evolved from a strongman to a democrat.

19. (SBU) In a country where anything can happen, it is still too early to tell what impact the dissolution of the Millennium Combination will have on voters. For now at least, the ruling New Front (NF) coalition appears to have gained a little ground from the disbanding of the most important opposition bloc. Still, Surinamers are disillusioned with the Venetiaan administration's management of the economy, the slow pace toward development and reform, and the widespread perception that the administration has accomplished little during its tenure. This is in spite of stabilizing the economy, which will see a 5% growth this year. Surinamers yearn for tangible proof of a government's endeavors. The bridges constructed during the Wijdenbosch administration remain a source of his continuing popularity. While a number of development projects are reportedly in the works, the NF coalition government may have waited too long to deliver the goods to woo voters in the run up to the 2005 elections. End Comment.

BARNES

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